

**WIDE** ANGLE

# THE HORROR IN THE BALKANS: CIVILIAN VICTIMS IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR IN THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA



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During the course of the second world war, more than 900 thousand civilians perished in Yugoslavia during its invasion by the Axis powers.

Between 1941 and 1945, persecutions and massacres of unprecedented ferocity had undertaken on the Yugoslav soil, expressly directed against the civilian population.

With this paper it is analysed, through sources and testimonies published and unpublished, the period that goes from April 1941 to September 1943 in the area interested by the Italian occupation. More precisely, the brutal actions against the Serbs, Jews and Rom populations from the Croatian regime, the NDH (Nezavisna Država Hrvatska, Independent State of Croatia) placed under Italian influence and entrusted to the leader of the party Ustaša Ante Pavelić, and war crimes for which it has scorched the Italian army in the territories under its control are retraced through this paper.

If a veritable carnage was consumed by militias Ustaša, made of massacres, torture, deportations with racial and religious nature, aimed at “ethnic cleansing” of their boundaries, the cruelty which was used by the Italian troops, on the basis of directives which codified retaliation as a massive instrument of persuasion and punishment of civilians; the raking and the mass internment which involved indistinctly men, women, children and the elderly – as means to “depopulate and devastate entire regions”, was not less, according to the conclusions reached by the Commission of State for investigations on crimes of the occupants (Belgrade, 1946).

Events that had been removed for a long time and still poorly known to the general public, have been reconstructed here through the analysis of the most salient historical passages and the survivor’s story.

**Keywords:** second world war, former Yugoslavia, ethnic cleansing, nazi fascism, civilian victims, Italian occupation, Ustaša

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## The conflict in the Balkans and the Italian occupation

The second world war arrived in Yugoslavia on 6th April 1941. On that date, on the eve of Palm Sunday, the German army moved the attack in just 11 days and affirmed the conquest of the kingdom by the Axis forces.

The Italians invaded the Dalmatian coast and occupied Ljubljana on the 11th of April. On the 17th, the high command of Yugoslavia surrendered.

The division of the invaded lands, which shattered Yugoslavia politically as well as militarily, was as quick as the enemy progression.

Italy claimed part of Slovenia and annexed Dalmatia, from Zadar to Split, as well as a protectorate on Montenegro, Kosovo and the western Macedonia. In these territories lived, in different proportions and precarious equilibrium, Slovenes, Croats, Serbs, Italians, Montenegrins, Albanians and Macedonians, toward which were applied policies of fascist indoctrination and attempts of denationalisation.<sup>1</sup> The remaining part of the Yugoslav territories were divided between Germany, Bulgaria and Hungary. Finally, the Independent State of Croatia (NDH – Nezavisna Država Hrvatska) was created, including Croatia-Slavonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (that was occupied in the summer of 1941 by the Italian army) and some Dalmatian islands (Pag, Brač and Hvar).

In this way the fascist government fulfilled its expansionist intents on the Balkan's territories, the same that was precluded at the end of the first world war and that had allowed Mussolini to feed the myth of the "mutilated victory". The regime's propaganda had since then encouraged a revisionist political action that focused on the return of what Italy "legitimately" deserved: or rather, using a sinister analogy to Nazi vocabulary, what was defined as Italian "vital space" on the eastern borders.<sup>2</sup> In order to claim that legitimacy, racial motivations were associated with historical and geopolitical reasons. "Italy is the only Mediterranean country of the Aryan race. This is enough to explain to anyone who has a culture, that it naturally possesses a prominent position in the Great Internal Sea".<sup>3</sup> – wrote Giovanni Ansaldo in January 1941.

In 1941 Italy, supported by the powerful German ally, benefited from a position of supremacy in the occupied territories in the Balkans. In these zones, civilians were mistreated with violence. At the same time a process of strong "Italianization" of the population started. This process was even more painful for the original population because it had been perpetrated by their worst enemy, the fascist regime, ally of the Croatian nationalism of Ustaša, who in the year 1934 committed the murder of King Alexander I in Marseilles.<sup>4</sup>

"Here in Dalmatia, in Split – told Lovre Reić, Croatian partisan, who was fourteen at the time of the conflict – "we have always been told that the Italians were our enemies. When I heard the news of the murder of King Alexander, I came out of my house with a knife to go in search of a young boy belonging to an Italian wire family; I wanted to take revenge on him for the assassination of our king. I didn't even know what a kingdom or a social system was, but he was the king of my country and our enemies, the Italians, had killed him". He was a young man named Pige, who played football



**Soldiers pose with children in the area occupied by Italian forces.**

*Credit: Padre Paolino Beltrame Quattrocchi, cappellano militare.*

and belonged to an Italian wire family”.<sup>5</sup> These few words synthetically testify, the violence that was caused by the invader’s occupation and the primordial barbarism that the act of war produced generating sides and divisions, which enter conflictly into the life of the local community, modifying the social balance.

“The mistrust and hostility towards Italy is still nourished as confirmed in 1940 by the Italian military attached in Belgrade – that it is often concealed but it came out in the daily conversations. The story returns to circulate quite often that Italy wants to claim back part of Dalmatia and Southern Serbia. Driven by the blindness of hatred for Italians, many people declared that it would be better if the Russians came and that it would be better than the Italian domain!”.<sup>6</sup>

“The hardest thing that could happen psychologically, at that time – explained Reić, recalling the days of the invasion in April 1941 – was that the Italians arrived. [...] When they arrived, wearing black shirts, you can imagine how disgusting and unacceptable it was”.

Reić, who was 20 at that time, had a very different maturity of observation and action from that of Slvako Degoricija, 10 years old at that time, whose witness allows us to investigate the specificity and complexity of the impact of war on children:

“I remember the day when Yugoslav surrendered. It was Easter Sunday 1941, an Italian Division came to Otočac from Rijeka (Fiume). For us children it was like a miracle. Tanks, military vehicles, soldiers in uniform. We were returning from the church, and when we saw them, we stopped to acknowledge them [...] my father suddenly appeared and began to shout at us, saying that we should be ashamed for having acknowledged the occupants. And he hit me. It was the only time he ever hit me. [...] I did not even know what the words occupant and stranger meant. This is my first memory of the Second World War.



The Italians set up bilingual signs in Otočac. Older kids, who attended high school, told us to tear them down and we did it at night. We were children, we didn't understand, we took it for a joke. The next morning, the Italian police came at school, they had leather whips, approximately one meter long, to hit us. We began to run, just near the school there was the river Gacka, it was late autumn, even though the water was freezing, I threw myself into it. The whip hit me anyway, along my whole body, from the shoulder to the heel. I threw myself in the frozen river and then ran home. [...] So we learned how to live with the war as children. We learned how to endure. While our region was occupied, the German airplanes bombed us, the British airplanes bombed us, even the partisans bombed us.”<sup>7</sup>

For a child is difficult, if not impossible, to understand war and that leaves permanent signs. The confusion that it generates is amplified by childish imagination. Firstly, the game is confused with the reality, missing any awareness or maturity needed to be able to clarify the events surrounding them, children are fascinated by what they should fear or hate and, on the contrary, are frightened or traumatized by minor episodes. It is not a case that Degoricija concludes by saying:

“People often ask me how I managed to withstand the civil war [which has bloodied the Balkans during the nineties]. I answered saying that, I crossed far more difficulties when I was a child. The period from 1941 to 1945 was much harder than the civil war”.

## **The Croatian regime of Ustaša**

On the 18th of May, one month after the invasion, Italo-Croats agreements were concluded with the creation of an Italian protectorate on the NDH. The Independent State of Croatia, whose creation was supported by the Nazi-Fascist forces in order to facilitate the process of disintegration of Yugoslavia<sup>8</sup> and especially the political and territorial union of the Serb nation, included not only Croatia but also a large part of the Bosnia and Herzegovina where there were more than one million and a half Serbs and half a million Muslims. Since the beginning, the new established government was characterised with crimes against ethnic and religious minorities.

Ante Pavelić, the leader of the fascist and National Socialist inspired party of Ustaša, who returned from a long exile in Italy, proclaimed himself poglavnik (leader of Croats). He then started a violent policy of “Croatization”, in addition to the rules designed to undermine the Serbian identity, such as the abolition of the use of the Cyrillic alphabet and the purification of the national offices, he enacted racial laws against Jews and Gypsies.<sup>9</sup> The escalation that saw those rules degenerate, unleashing a terrible spiral of horror and death, was dramatically short.

The secular ethnic and religious rivalry and hatred, which the racial laws already reinforced with legal support in the countries which were allies of the axis forces, were linked with the policy of power, influenced by strategic, military and economic interests and aimed to obtain an unchallenged domain through the repression of any form of opposition. This purpose was already clear in 1940 through the words of the



**Old men, women and children kept and deported.**

*Credit: Padre Paolino Beltrame Quattrocchi, cappellano militare.*

Italian Consul in Zagreb. In his speech, describing the political situation of the foreign minister Ciano in Yugoslavia, he highlighted how “the Jewish element, which has an important economic status quo in Croatia, [...] has always supported the Serbians in order to weaken the economic positions of Croatia and consequently the nationalization process”<sup>10</sup>, so it was important to “expel the freemasons and Jews that polluted our whole policy”.<sup>11</sup>

The Ustaša promoted violence against the national minorities of Serbian-orthodox, Jews and Rom, using massive and systematic ethnic cleansing, implemented through the physical removal of a part of the civil population, with hundreds of thousands of victims, the deportation of the survivors, the forced conversion to Catholicism.<sup>12</sup> Of the approximately twenty concentration camps established, the camps that sadly remained are the famous ones of Slano, on the island of Pag, and the Jasenovac, where around 120 thousand people lost their lives.<sup>13</sup>

To escape persecution, the Serbs did not hesitate to ask for help from the Italians. These were moved from the necessity to counteract the alliance between the Germans and the Ustaša, potentially harmful for the control of the territory. Protection was also offered to part of the Jews escaping from the Nazis and Croats massacres.<sup>14</sup>

From this aspect, it appears interesting a document of the end of 1943, requested by the Italian Military Ordinariate, in which the military chaplain Cesare Beltrame Quattrocchi, operating in the 27th sector and then in the 5th Grouping guard at the border from April 1941, described in great detail, the many cases of violence perpetrated by the forces of the NDH in the region of Lika. Entire families, young and old people, children were massacred and burned down, while the survivors, wounded or mutilated, tried to escape and looked for rescue in the Italian military hospitals.<sup>15</sup>



## The witness of the Italian military chaplain

“The night of 15 August 1941, together with two medical officers and four armed men, we entered in the woods at the foot of the Velebit Mountain, a zone controlled by Ustaša. We headed to an isolated house indicated to us by a Chetniks, guided by a Serbian woman masquerading as an Italian soldier. We knocked at the door, without anyone answering. After about half an hour the woman went in the woods and returned accompanied by a living skeleton, an exhausted and hungry man. He spoke a few words through the window and the door opened. An unbearable stench fell upon us: on the floor a terrified woman and three children laid without saying a word. The woman, Serbian, had been hit ten days before by the gun of an Ustaša member, while carrying her baby on the breast walking through the fields. The baby had died and she had a broken femur and a perforated lung. She was living for ten days hermetically sealed in that room with the other babies under the nightmare of terror, she emanated an intolerable stench. That face now furrowed by death [...] was loaded on a stretcher and transported at the military hospital of Otocac under the fire of the Ustaša. [...]

From statistical data in possession of the command of the 2nd army in September 1941, victims of the carnage of the Ustaša exceeded one hundred thousand. In December of the same year it had reached half a million. These rumours were circulating in the official circles of our commands. [...] As far as I am about to expose, reflecting my own personal experience in a limited and restricted sector, it is easy to imagine the immense abyss of hatred and bloodshed dug by the same Balkan peoples in their own land in the space of a few months from summer of 1941.

Ustaša law acknowledges the extermination of the Serbs and the oppression of the Jews. From what I saw with my own eyes and heard with my own ears, the Croatsians



**A man shot to death in the countryside in the area occupied by Italian forces.**

*Credit: Padre Paolino Beltrame Quattrocchi, cappellano militare.*

of Pavelić have killed thousands of Serbs of any sex or age, even infants on their mother's breasts for only one reason: because they were Serbs.

On the morning of 1st August 1941, in the early hours of dawn in Gospic (capital of the province in the region of Lika), I was awakened by gunfire and clamours. At the periphery of the village a house burns: a house of Serbs. The Ustaša broke into night and have sown this dismay and death. In the entrance laid half carbonized and twisted by the flames, the corpses of two children, a boy and a girl around ten years (photo). Accompanied by some officers of the regiment, I entered through the scorching ruins of the destroyed house. In the only room saved by the flames I found a surprise: a cradle with a baby, few months old crying inside. It seems a wonder that among so much ruins, an innocent creature survived. We went closer to the cradle, we caressed the child who revealed two tired eyes. We think that he might have suffered from the smoke, and while I was taking the baby outside, I noticed a red stain on his clothes. Lifting the clothes, I saw a horrible superficial wound caused by a firearm that rips the belly. After a few moments the baby died, an unconscious victim of a hate without a name”.

The same evening, the reports continued, Milica Matić, a girl of 14 years, came from the field hospital 823 of Otocac, bringing in her arms, her sister Danica of 5 years. They were both stabbed on the road by two Ustaša just because they were known as Serbians”, and the older one had found the strength to run away with her sister.

The testimony of Milica Matić<sup>16</sup> is touching as well, (we do not know whether it is the same young woman referenced by the witness of the chaplain or if it is a case of homonymous, but the times and places of the facts narrated coincide), which shows a glimpse on another ferocious aspect of Ustaša persecution against the Serbs: the massacres of an entire villages in carsick pits of the region, the infamous foibe. Milica bears out the story of the now elderly mother Marija on the massacre of the village of Divoselo, 5 August 1941, when a hundred inhabitants, mainly women and children, were caught by Ustaša and taken to the pit of Jarčja Jama. Only one in in ten survived, “to be able to tell what they saw and what they lived”, says Marija.

In the spring of 1941 the Ustaša had broken into the country, occupied the school and ordered men to introduce themselves. Unprepared and unaware, the men had obeyed. They never returned, they were killed in the most atrocious ways, victims of the naivety of those who had never experienced the blind violence that would break out from those hours.

The remained inhabitants escaped in the woods, while the Croatian military destroyed the village. In August, the decision to proceed with the definitive ethnic cleansing triggered the massacre of the Serbs of Divoselo and the fire coming from its ruins. It was on the 2nd August when women, children and the elderly moved to Mount Velebit in search of salvation. It was in this moment that the Ustaša trapped them. They killed the men immediately, brought with them the others, many people were tortured, under the terrified eyes of prisoners. They caught about 120 children and women and 50 men. Women were raped. After a few days of imprisonment, with the

promise to go to Gospic, the hostages were transported to the Mount Velebit again. Here they were stabbed in groups and thrown into the pits. Marija saw her mother-in-law and his three sons fall down the pit before being thrown in it as well. She was the only one that managed to climb up again, but she could never forget what happened. [Divoselo will be rebuilt and demolished again in the civil war of the 1990s].

The civilians injured, especially young people and women, kept coming in the evening – as the report of the chaplain continues, trusting the protection of the dark: a seventeen year old was wounded by a firearm; two young Serbians, arrived at the hospital through the forest, after being tracked by a patrol of Ustaša (photo). On the evening of the 10th of August, two exhausted young women came from the woods. One of them was Milena Stanic, 12 years old, stabbed at home with her parents ten days before, near Raduc, and believed dead. “She was still wearing the dress perforated by the stabbing, filled with pus and blood (medical report: wound from stabbing and cuts on the right cheek and in the sixth and seventh intercostal space with lesions at internal organs...)”. The other Serbian girl, Sofia Podkonjiak (photo), had some wounds from a firearm as well, “hit in the chest from Ustaša armed forces while carrying her son in her arms, the child was killed in the attack”. A Serbian, an old woman came with her throat completely ripped from a stab; a child of 12 years horribly wounded, brought to the camp by his father and uncle; a girl of a few months old had deep wounds in her chest; a Serbian boy of 14 years, had a hand mutilated which occurred at the field hospital of Gospic after spending 15 days between the countryside and the woods to escape from Ustaša. “It was necessary to send him to Otocac for amputation.” (photo).

“But the atrocious torture of Ustaša were not confined to individual cases. Entire population was taken away from their homes and, sometimes with a little luggage, sometimes without anything, dragged into prisons. The prison of Gospic was tragically famous where hundreds and hundreds of victims were amassed there waiting to be led to slaughter. Entire trains of victims in closed wagons from south also arrived to Gospic [...]. In the photo 55 I could take a snapshot of a truck of prisoners that emerge from the prison of Gospic, accompanied by Ustaša armed with machine guns. Everyone knew that the same truck would be returned empty not long afterwards, the corpses of the prisoners would be released in the woods nearby. But sometimes episodes for the human slaughterhouse were carried out in a much larger scale: new guests arrived and it was necessary to make more space. In the photographs from 56, 67 [...] about 800 men were chained two by two: Serbs, Montenegrins, Jews, civil, railwaymen, boys, old people [...] were forced to exit from the prison and sit down on the ground. Shortly afterwards, they started to move silently outside the city, marching all in front of my camera, tragically conscious of their destiny. As the others columns of prisoners, they never arrived to Carlopago. After about half an hour, a long and sustained noise of firearms made me understand that their torment was sadly finished. A truck brought back the Ustaša with a stock of long chains of steel: those which would have accompanied to the massacre, the next column of victims.



**An amputee Serbian 14-years-old in the Gospic camp's hospital.**

*Credit: Padre Paolino Beltrame Quattrocchi, cappellano militare.*

Where and how did the victims end? One day, at the beginning of September 1941, a Chetnik begged me to follow him into a forest, in the direction of Lovinac. I followed him accompanied by two officers and some soldiers. [...] The Chetnik himself dug the earth using a pickaxe and a shovel, and after the first layer of ground coated with formalin, about half a meter deep, emerged the first pile of dead bodies, half dressed, stacked on each other in four or five piles (photo). How many were dead in that forest? How many of these forests are in the bloody Balkan?"

Desolating, finally, the description of the concentration camp of the Island of Pag, where the chaplain came only when the extermination was finished. At the end of the summer of 1941, the Italian occupation of Dalmatia was extended to the demilitarized zone, including the Croatian coast, Croatian Dalmatia and part of Herzegovina, from which the Ustaša military formations were forced to leave.<sup>17</sup> It was only then that the lieutenant chaplain could visit the now abandoned camp, and bear witness.

"On the Island of Pag which remained, according to the initial agreements, under the jurisdiction of Zagreb - or rather under the Pavelić NDH - the Croats erected, at the most isolated and arid point, a dual concentration camp separated for men and women, marked by the hot sun, sharp rock, barbed wire: nothing else. During the day the men were sent away for an hour to dig a large trench, or to trace a useless road on the rock under the sun heat. Women were employed for cooking and washing."

However, it was expected a further torture for women, too often used during conflicts, and that here, bitterly and in unprecedented proportions, will be repeated 50 years later:<sup>18</sup> collective rape by the jailers. In this passage, the chaplain's report becomes atrocious: "In the evening, he tells, according to testimonies that I personally collected between August 15 and 20, a boat picked up the most merciful youngsters of the Ustaša movement in Segna or Carlopago or Pago while a field of Serb, Jew and Mon-

tenegrin women became the theater of their libido. In particular, everyone was talking about a young girl of twenty-year-old, daughter of a Serbian general, beautiful and noble looking, who, after having spent a night under the yoke of 20 or 30 brigands, was thrown into the sea with a stone on her neck. However, when the Italian military commanded the military occupation of the coastal zone, there were about 3,000 persons in the camp of Pag, including men and women.”

The internees of the camps who were on the mainland were quickly transported inland, where the Italian control would not have been extended. Regarding Pag, being an Island, the operation became difficult: it could only be reached by sea and only by sea it could go away. When the transfer of powers took place, the Italian command decided to visit the part of the island destined for the interment, the camp was found empty. It was August 13 1941, when the chaplain was also invited to participate in the expedition. After about an hour of walking, the soldiers came to a wide and deep trench (photo). “But at some point it appeared to have been filled to its height. This was extended for over 50 meters, as well as three other large trenches of the same length and depth, which were enclosed transversally to the main one.

The trenches were full of corpses, the bodies of the three thousand internees of Pag. There were enough drilling to bring the massacre to light, while the pitches of the machine guns witnessed the ways in which it had been accomplished. “The trenches regurgitated corpses leaning against each other in the strangest poses. Some lay still holding a handbag in his hand [...]; a woman still had a pillow under her arm; another woman, an umbrella. A little girl had her head reclined on the laps of a young man. Another young girl, with her ripped clothes and her legs spread, showed traces of the latest post-mortem outrage.”

## The Italian Crimes

In the attacked and dismembered Yugoslavia, the resistance was quickly organized, which further contributed to aggravating the condition of the civilians, from where each party in the fight claimed loyalty to their cause. Chetniks and Partisans were both militarily organized whose ideological distances prevented them from forming a single front. The former, ex military of the Yugoslav Army, created a sort of an alliance with Italians, being interested in preventing German troops from entering the Croatian areas under their control;<sup>19</sup> the latter fought against the Ustaša as well as against the Italian military forces, gaining strength and positions quickly. It was, in the first place, the enervating partisan guerrillas which caused to stiffen the positions of the Italian military commands and to address the decisions to an increasingly intransigent and aggressive attitude towards the population.

Vladimir Bobinac was among the partisans, today among the witnesses of the events that occurred in Dalmatia between 1941 and 1945. Born in 1923, in Zagreb, he clearly recalls the entry of the German army into the city on April 10, 1941. Following the invasion of the enemy and the birth of the Croatian state, he chose anti-fascism and





**Prisoners of Gospic's jail in a straight line outside the prison.**

*Credit: Padre Paolino Beltrame Quattrocchi, cappellano militare.*

entered the SKOJ (Young Communist League of Yugoslavia). In December that year, he was arrested by the Ustaša Surveillance Service; beaten and tortured in jail, he escaped deportation to the notorious camp Jasenovac because he was orphaned of father, with a mother and a college sister to look after. He was released in May 1942. It was not the same for his cell companions: Silvestar Pelcl, condemned to death and shot, and a teacher named Stažić, author, before the outbreak of the war, of some of the articles that condemned the ideas and the works of the Ustaša; his fate was the Jasenovac camp.<sup>20</sup>

If Vladimir Bobinac had made a choice, that of joining the partisans, many civilians were not able or willing to do so. This did not put them in shelter. Among the various parties in the fight (Italians, Croats, Chetniks, Partisans; not analyzing the behavior of the German army here) the civilian population was involved with no way to escape. The situation worsened since 1942, when Italian commanders, in response to the partisan guerrilla, decided to implement an indiscriminate policy of violence and retaliation on citizens. Directives were issued that led to the use of brutal coercive and punitive systems in the Balkans, not different from those of the Croatian regime: raids and deportations of civilians, shootings of resisters and hostages, village fires, looting and destructions.

Circular “3C” in particular, issued by General Roatta on March 1, introduced a new principle in the Italian repressive system: the explicit and direct involvement of the population in the military and political management of adjacent or occupied Yugoslav areas. The general order established by Roatta was expressly directed against civilians, as “potential” supporters of the national liberation army, as well as against the resistance movement itself.<sup>21</sup> The circular had only codified and widened the climate of terror set up by the Italian military leaders since the beginning of the year, and since the previous year (September 1941) in Slovenia and Montenegro, when, in order to subdue the



population, the superintendent of Ljubljana, Ettore Messina, on the instructions of High Commissioner Grazioli, had ordered the men of the Royal Army to “use all the necessary methods.” Methods described in detail: “bribe, use physical violence to gain information about resistance, imprisoned, interned, plundered and killed.”<sup>22</sup>

The executions of civilians killed by retaliation became more and more numerous, extending to all the territories under Italian control. In some directives of 8 January 1942, General Robotti, head of the XI Corps of Arms, stated that anti-partisan actions did not have to “save the facilitators and their homes,” considering that it was “unacceptable that rebels attack a military barrack, a place, without the people knowing it. And if some people are afraid of dying at the hands of the partisans, if they speak, may be as afraid to die by our hands if they do not speak.”<sup>23</sup>

On the basis of the 3C circular, a series of orders were issued by the various commands, which stipulated that “Only women were to be wounded, males under the age of 18 to be denounced and all the others must be immediately shot on the spot.”<sup>24</sup> By derogation from this directive, General Maccario, on Robotti’s instruction on March 26th, ordered that all the family members of the partisans and their neighbors be shot.

Lastly, on May 6, the method of retaliation was codified in a joint proclamation by Roatta and Robotti, which provided for the “shooting of hostage groups” in the event that the person responsible for any incident chargeable to “communist brigades” was not identified within 48 hours.<sup>25</sup> To this is added the systematic devastation of whole regions, whose villages were buried and burnt.<sup>26</sup>

As mentioned, and as stressed by the State Commission on War Crimes in Yugoslavia,<sup>27</sup> the series of “criminal measures” adopted by the Italians against the civilian population of the occupied provinces included deportation and mass internment in concentration camps under inhuman and degrading conditions.

If a large number of “unwanted” elements were interned according to a logic of individual responsibility, there were repeated raids whose targets were imprisoned in bulk “in order to disrupt and devastate entire regions.”<sup>28</sup> The deportations came to their peak in the summer of 1942, after the governor of Dalmatia, on June 7, ordered the erection of new camps destined for the mass internment.<sup>29</sup> For the Yugoslavs around 200 Italian concentration camps were distributed between Yugoslavia, Albania and Italy. According to an incomplete estimate, more than 150,000 people passed through.<sup>30</sup>

Special troops were used to crackdown on civilian populations – women, children, elderly – and to see to their deportation. Treatments suffered – humiliation, torture, violence – led many of the victims to diseases and to death. Merely in the camp set up in the island of Rab (Arbe), among the most sadly known, the death rate was 34%.

Such resolutions were not strictly related to racial, ethnic or religious reasons, except in the perspective of a supposed superiority of their own Italian, Arian, Christian origin; they were rather following a logic of power, aimed at obtaining absolute and undisturbed domination in the occupied areas. The term “pacification”, which was often used, contained a clear distortion of the concept of peace, where the social harmony



**Prisoners of Gospic's jails waiting for execution.**

*Credit: Padre Paolino Beltrame Quattrocchi, cappellano militare.*

that it expressed replaced instead a condition of terror, violence, devastation, whose debris set up a new political state of affairs.

Many of the deported were family members or simply neighbors of those who “presumed” belonged to the rebels. In Circular 2468 / AC, which followed the 3C shortly after, entitled “Proceedings against the family of the rebels,” General Roatta specified the measures to be taken to “normalize life in the provinces annexed to the Kingdom of Italy” underlining the “urgent necessity of particularly strict means”. It was necessary to “hurt evil in the roots and the branches, with measures having repercussions in the souls of the fugitives and in the material lives of the kin.” Thus, it was necessary to “move on to the more prominent families in Italy who had some male members among the rebels”. It was not indispensable to ascertain that the latter belonged to the resistance; it was sufficient that he was “absent without clear reasons”. The same treatment was for the “modest class” families, while for the others, it was necessary to reduce the number of registered foodstuffs – first-rate foodstuffs obtainable only with a tapering card – and the ban on circulation. This is only because the internment of “all”<sup>31</sup> families was considered “inadmissible practically”.

The provisions contained in this circular correspond exactly to what Lovre Reić testified, whose personal and family affair is an emblematic example of that of thousands of families in the two years 1941-1943.

“They came by night,” said Reić, “was the spring of 1942. I was not in the house, I was in the front building. They brushed everything, threw objects and furniture from the windows, I heard crying and screaming. They beat my grandfather, 81, and my grandmother, 80. I heard my mother and my 9-year-old brother crying. They were hitting them. I was in a dilemma: whether to come in and face them or not; I did not have any weapons. I was on the fourth floor of the neighbor’s place; I thought I was going



**A newborn wounded to death found in his crib by Italian soldiers after Ustashe attacked the house.**

*Credit: Padre Paolino Beltrame Quattrocchi, cappellano militare.*

to throw myself and put an end to my life. Terrace after terrace I came to a friend's house, where I was housed for a few hours. In the morning they offered me coffee and escorted me to a clandestine passage. Then I joined the partisans.

My grandparents, my aunt, my father, my mother, my sister and my little brother, my then-girlfriend, Zorka Penović, and her three sisters, the youngest of whom was 12 years old, were arrested. Some of them were sent to Italy and interned, others remained imprisoned in Split until the capitulation of Italy. They were declared outlaws, the house was demolished. My grandfather died of hunger at age 83. My mother was killed by the Ustaša on the day of St. Domnius [patron of Split]. Although imprisoned, in an Italian jail, she showed some resistance. My 11-year-old brother joined the partisans, the youngest partisan of Mosor detachment.”<sup>32</sup>

In September 1943, the capitulation of Italy put an end to the occupation regime and its related crimes. On the Yugoslav soil, however, the conflict lasted for another two years, until the defeat of Germany in Europe and the victory of the partisans of Tito in the Balkans.

While the many deported in the Italian concentration camps joined the vast array of so-called displaced persons, many of whom were recruited by the allies in the resistance,<sup>33</sup> on the Croatian soil, the Ustaša continued to fight an increasingly strong partisan resistance, remaining faithful to Hitler until the end.

A good part of the leadership group, including Pavelić, managed to escape to the West after May 1945. Tens of thousands of others (or allegedly) members compromised with the regime suffered post-war Communist massacres, death marches and other types of persecution.<sup>34</sup> The extermination, in short, continued to perpetrate but to inverted parts.

The Croats were relieved of the sins of Ustaša crimes, though thousands of them fought in the rows of resistance, opposing Pavelić's bloody dictatorship as much as the Serbs.

Jelena Baketa, a Croatian born in 1934, the daughter of a Ustaša killed in 1943, told of discrimination suffered throughout her life because of her origins. Origins, however, that remained obscure for many years, for none of his family dared to tell the truth about his father, an inconceivable secret that she discovered alone, or rather intuitively, when she grew up, when everyone refused to give her a job. She could not even ask for her father's news, and only in 1992 she could finally find his grave.<sup>35</sup>

The victorious partisans had introduced a communist dictatorship focused on the issue of success in the fight against foreign occupants and their internal collaborators, building on this distinction, rather than reconciliation, the new Yugoslav state.

The division between the winners and the defeated of the war was bound to have a considerable impact on Croatia when democratic transformations would end up wiping out the communist monopoly.<sup>36</sup>

As the First World War had planted the seeds of the second, with a territorial arrangement laid down at the tables of peace that, rather than contributing to restoring internal and international equilibrium had fueled feelings of redraft, so the second one set in motion the gears that would have led to the conflict of the 1990s, engaging post-social social reconstruction on discrimination rather than on reconciliation.

To pay the most serious and dramatic consequences, once again, of a too high, still unspecified number<sup>37</sup> of civilian casualties.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Cf. no. Troha, the border with Italy before and after the Second World War. The Yugoslavian project, in L. Bertucelli-M. Orlić (curated by), a Balkan history - fascism and communism and nationalism in Yugoslavia of the Twentieth Century, Shadows Court, Verona 2008, p. 72.
- <sup>2</sup> The editorial in the "Internazionali-Settimanale relations with foreign policy", VII, 2, 18 January 1941, Institute for International Policy Studies, Milan.
- <sup>3</sup> G. Ansaldo, "The action Greek and Mediterranean policy of Italy", in "Internazionali-Settimanale relations with foreign policy", VII, 2, 18 January 1941, Institute for International Policy Studies, Milan, pp. 66, 69.
- <sup>4</sup> E. Of Nolfo, by military empires to technological empires, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2013, p. 109.
- <sup>5</sup> CroMe Croatian (Memories) - Unveiling personal memories of war and detention, <http://www.croatianmemories.org/en/video-archive/lovre-reic/> URL consulted on 12/05/2016.
- <sup>6</sup> the military attaché italian in Belgrade, Bonfatti, to the Ministry of War, R. secret 1235, Belgrade, 8 July 1940, Italian Diplomatic Documents (DDI), IX Series, Vol. V, D. 204, p. 194.
- <sup>7</sup> CroMe, <http://www.croatianmemories.org/en/videoarchive/slavkodegoricija1/?-search=keyword&val=231>, URL, consulted on 15/05/2016
- <sup>8</sup> Cf. E. Collotti, economic penetration and disintegration statale: premises and consequences of the nazi aggression against Yugoslavia, in E. Collotti-T. Conference Room at the care of the Axis powers and the Yugoslavia. Essays and Papers 1941-1943, Milan, Feltrinelli, 1974, pp. 36-46.
- <sup>9</sup> C. Sante, in the fields of Titus, Shadows Court, Verona, p. 22.
- <sup>10</sup> The consul general in Zagreb, Gobbi, Foreign Minister; cyano, Telespr. Reserved, 16 July 1940, DDI IX Series, Vol. V, D. 260, p. 245.
- <sup>11</sup> Minister in Belgrade, Mameli, foreign minister, cyano, R. confidential, 2 September 1940, DDI, IX Series, Vol. V, D. 533, p. 526.
- <sup>12</sup> See M. Bucarelli, disintegration of Yugoslavia and the Serbian question, in the Italian occupation of Yugoslavia (1941-1943), Florence, Letters, 2008, p. 34.
- <sup>13</sup> C. Sante, in the fields of Titus, cit., p. 22.
- <sup>14</sup> Cf. ibid.; E. Collotti-T. Conference Room at the care of the Axis powers and the Yugoslavia. Essays and Papers 1941-1943, cit., pp. 59-62.
- <sup>15</sup> <http://www.balcanicaucaso.org/aree/Bosnia-Erzegovina/Ex-Yugoslavia-i-numeri-delle-vittime-della-guerra-31969>, URL, consulted on 11/07/2016.
- <sup>16</sup> <http://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/1671122-ustase-su-mi-pobile-troje-dece-i-bacili-ih-u->

jarcju-jamu-ispovest-zene-koja-je-prezivila-pakao-srpskog-naroda-u-jadovnu, URL, consulted on 15/06/2016.

<sup>17</sup> See: Marcello Flores (curated by), *Rape of war: Mass violence against women in the twentieth century*, Milan: Franco Angeli, 2010; Roy Gutman et al., *crimes of war 2.0: What the public should know the revised and updated Edition*, New York: WWNorton, 2007; Luisa Nails and Andrea Rossini, *the war to civilians in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Padova: DEP, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> See L. Monzali, *difficult alliance with Croatia Ustaša*, F. Caccamo-L. Monzali, edited by, *the Italian occupation of Yugoslavia (1941-1943)*, Florence, Letters, 2008, p. 79.

<sup>19</sup> on the collaboration between Italian troops and cetnici see M. Ković, *From Persecutors to Saviors: the Italian occupation forces of the Second World War in post-1989 Serbian historiography*, "Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans", 2004, n. 2, pp. 109-123. The competition italo-german and on rivalry italo-croatian see M. Bucarelli, cit., p. 43.

<sup>20</sup> CroMe, <http://www.croatianmemories.org/en/video-archive/vladimir-bobinac/>, URL, consulted on 15/05/2016.

<sup>21</sup> *English crimes in Yugoslavia, 2/6*, Yugoslav Information Office, London 1945, pp. 59-60.

<sup>22</sup> *English crimes in Yugoslavia, 2/6*, Yugoslav Information Office, London 1945, pp. 58-59.

<sup>23</sup> C. Sante, *in the fields of Titus*, cit., p. 25

<sup>24</sup> *English crimes in Yugoslavia, 2/6*, Yugoslav Information Office, London 1945, p. 61.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> *Report on Italian Crimes against Yugoslavia and its peoples*, The State Commission for the Investigation of war crimes, Belgrade 1946, p. 96.

<sup>27</sup> *Report on Italian Crimes against Yugoslavia and its peoples*, The State Commission for the Investigation of war crimes, Belgrade 1946.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 106-7.

<sup>31</sup> underlined in the original document.

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.croatianmemories.org/en/video-archive/lovre-reic/>, URL, consulted on 12/05/2016

<sup>33</sup> C. Sante, *in the fields of Titus*, cit., p. 47.

<sup>34</sup> L. Bertucelli-M. Orlić, *a Balkan history - fascism and communism and nationalism in Yugoslavia of the Twentieth Century*, Shadows Court, Verona, 2007, p. 177.

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.croatianmemories.org/en/video-archive/jelena-baketa/>, URL, consulted on 05/06/2016.



<sup>36</sup> See L. Bertucelli-M. Orlić, *a Balkan history*, cit., p. 177.

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.balcanicaucaso.org/aree/Bosnia-Erzegovina/Ex-Jugoslavia-i-numeri-delle-vittime-della-guerra-31969>, URL, consulted on 11/07/2016.



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